Some 78% of the grazing commons in the state of Gujarat have been acquired by investors and other actors, restricting access for local land users. Local NGO Maldhari Rural Action Group (MARAG) worked with local communities to launch "Wheels of Hope", a motorbike campaign that covered a distance of 1,200km, nine districts, and twenty five blocks in eight days, targeting the community development blocks with the highest rates of encroachment and acquisition of common land. Through the campaign, local communities established that rights over the commons belong to those who depend on them for their livelihoods.
BACKGROUND

With rapid industrialisation and privatisation, common land in Gujarat is being acquired at a rapid pace. This is affecting pastoralists, who are dependent on the commons for their livelihoods. Due to the acquisition of common lands, pastoralists are unable to maintain their livestock, and this is discouraging youth from taking up the pastoralist way of life.

THE CHALLENGE

The “Wheels of Hope” motorbike campaign covered a distance of 1,200km in nine districts and 25 blocks over eight days. The campaign sought to challenge the occupation of common lands and to establish that they belong to those who depend on them for their livelihoods. It also sought to provide secure land tenure for community members, especially young pastoralists living in Gujarat. In response to the land grabbing they have experienced, communities in Gujarat have campaigned for land to be allocated and titles registered for every family and their livestock.

Historically, the commons have belonged collectively to every pastoralist living in the area; they were never claimed or registered under private title. Over time, however, pastoralists have been left with meagre portions of land. According to the State Government of Gujarat, 78% of common land in the state has been either acquired or grabbed by individuals, corporations, or government.
OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGE

To have the maximum impact, MARAG engaged with pastoralists with wider political and religious affiliations, because they have a greater social impact. It undertook background research into the issue, and over a period of four months talked to community members, youth, and pastoralists to gather information about the challenges they face in accessing the commons with their livestock and the effects that occupation of common land by others has had on their livelihoods.

MARAG developed strategies for inclusive and participatory processes to employ in the campaign. Through participatory planning with community members, it was able to formulate clear messages for it: “Protecting cows and pasturelands” and “Communities that depend on commons have rights over them”. The local communities owned the campaign and contributed to its success.

Based on these messages, a charter of demands was drafted and delivered to all village, block, and district headquarters in the areas the campaign passed through. At the same time, MARAG made applications to the government to grant land title for their livestock to eligible pastoralists (vada).

MOVING TOWARDS PEOPLE-CENTRED LAND GOVERNANCE

Through the motorbike campaign, it was emphasised that local communities own the commons and have rights and duties to protect, preserve, manage, and sustain them. In response, the government accepted that encroachment on common grazing lands was taking place, and resolved to work with MARAG and the pastoral community to protect the grazing commons.

The government passed a resolution to protect common grazing land, and also issued a notification that community members who use pasturelands, particularly pastoralists and women, will receive land title. As a result, MARAG has made 7,000 applications on behalf of community members.

MARAG has been invited to assist in other areas that were not covered by the motorbike campaign, including the Rampara Wildlife Sanctuary area, where an Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) has been imposed. MARAG worked with the community in Rampara to file an objection against the ESZ, resulting in a stay of execution in its introduction.

The campaign has cultivated the interest of youth in participating in and sustaining traditional livelihoods. Local communities in the neighbouring villages of Saurashtra and Kutch are beginning to realise that they have a right to common lands and are beginning to speak out against encroachment.
THE GOOD PRACTICE IN FIVE SIMPLE STEPS

Preparation and planning: For a campaign to have impact, it must resonate with the public. This means that community members must be involved, to ensure community ownership. Youth engagement is essential because young people are important stakeholders. In this case, including youth in the campaign strengthened the common vision of all participants.

Use of slogans, catchphrases, and social media: MARAG developed a catchy name for the campaign and used clear and simple catchphrases to deliver the core message. The catchy slogans enhanced the impact of the campaign. MARAG also used social media to ensure online visibility.

Non-confrontational engagement with the state: The State of Gujarat is a major stakeholder and has the power to intervene to protect the land rights of local communities. As such, it is essential to engage with state departments in a non-confrontational way.

Coordinated team effort: A coordinated team effort is the key to a successful campaign. This includes planning the division of roles with all participants and community members, and also catering for possible emergency situations, such as road accidents.

Follow-up: Following up with the community, state, and other stakeholders was essential to achieving the intended goal. The magnitude and success of the campaign raised community expectations and led other communities to engage with MARAG for assistance. It is important to have strategies for addressing new community challenges as they arise.
THREE FACTORS OF SUCCESS AND REPLICABILITY

1. Knowledge of context and issue: It is essential to have a clear understanding of the context and the challenges that are being addressed through the campaign. Stakeholders are facing different challenges and it is essential to be clear about those that will be addressed. A failure to clearly articulate the aims of the project will exclude other stakeholders.

2. Clear roadmap and strategies: Since the campaign extended over a distance of 1,200km, MARAG had to plan for the different geographical terrains that participants would pass through. This required clear strategies tailor-made for all the different places that the campaign visited. Managing large crowds of young people was a challenge, and it was essential to recognise their land ownership grievances.

3. Strengthening local leadership: Promoting strong local leadership within communities is essential for the follow-up process. This gives communities the power to hold the government and other land owners in their communities to account.

LESSONS LEARNED

Campaigns should have support teams on-site and at their headquarters. These support teams should include people with diverse capacities such as skills in oratory, media expertise (particularly social media), and thematic planning. It is also essential to include local leaders, as they have an intimate knowledge of local challenges, and a logistics planning team for crisis management.

All campaign materials should be in local languages or dialects. This assists communities to relate to the campaign and promotes community ownership of it.

FIND OUT MORE

MARAG website: http://www.marag.org